

**Promising Practices Case Study:  
Peer Outreach Workers as Language Interpreters  
(Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, Toronto)**

### Background

In 2002, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services developed the Peer Outreach Worker (POW) model. Peer Outreach Workers link with immigrant/ refugee families and their children who speak the same language and support them to access resources in the community, create social support networks and reduce social isolation, participate more actively in the community and improve their health and well-being. POW responsibilities include: conducting outreach to isolated newcomer families in under- resourced neighbourhoods; providing information/referrals to health and social services, assisting with parenting workshops and fitness programs, accompaniment to social services, and, until 2005, providing *informal* interpretation. Ideally POWs are placed in a 3 year contract during which time they participate an interdisciplinary training program focused on community/primary health, research and early child development.

Partnership with other organizations is an important aspect of the Peer Outreach model. As part of their training, POWs work at neighborhood organizations where their languages are spoken by clients. Once trained, POWs accompany clients to service interfaces with partner agencies. These include, but are not limited to, Ontario Works, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, school and housing boards, and other non-profit agencies.

### The Model

In 2005, Access Alliance began training their POWs in language interpretation free of cost. Today, all POWs are required to undergo rigorous language interpretation training, pass the language test (CILISAT/ILISAT) and become fully certified interpreters. Not only are POWs respected members in their community who are able to share a sense of common experience with clients, they also speak the language, understand local dialects, and can interpret cultural norms. Adding the interpretation component to the peer model has been of great benefit to both service providers and clients at Access Alliance and beyond. POWs are able to reach out to emerging communities where trained interpreters don't exist and provide quality interpretation and outreach services. The certification in language interpretation gives POWs the professional edge they need to ensure high quality language interpretation services as they support newcomer families and service providers through many types of service interfaces.

### Challenges

Despite its advantages, the Peer Outreach Worker model presents several challenges. First, POWs are expected to play a dual role: that of 'peer' service provider and that of interpreter. While an interpreter, by job definition, must be able to distance her/himself from the client to maintain objectivity/neutrality in service provision, a good 'peer' is, by definition, not distant and able to represent clients because of their shared life experience. To carry out their duties successfully, the boundaries and expectations of both 'peer' service provider and interpreter need to be clearly defined (in theory and practice) to avoid confusion. Second, POWs are often seen as the 'rescuer' or the 'advocate' and feel compelled to be deeply involved with the client as opposed to providing the client with the tools required to empower him/herself. Third, since POWs live in the same neighborhood as their client, public/private spaces are

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often blurred, and POWs continue working when off the clock. Fourth, POWs are considered members of an interdisciplinary team and are accessed by multiple staff teams at Access Alliance (research, primary health and other) for their skill set. As a result they experience a heavy work load that needs to be carefully managed. Fifth, while POWs appreciate the opportunity to learn and develop professional networks during their 3 year tenure, they feel underpaid in relation to other comparable entry level positions in community health and social services. This can lead to a steady turnover rate as they leave for better paying opportunities. A possible incentive-based solution to this problem could be to increase the salary scale in larger increments as 'training' gives way to 'experience' over the course of the three years.

### Results/Sustainability

*Results:* Two formal evaluations conducted by Access Alliance of the POW model in 2004 and 2007 showed that the peer model is most effective in serving newcomer communities. POWs are best at their job because they are able to wear multiple hats. They are outreach workers and interpreters; friends and service providers; peers and advocates. Adding language interpreter training to the Peer Outreach model added a certifiable skill-set to the job description and enhances the quality of services POWs provide.

*Sustainability:* While the interpretation sector is susceptible to regular staff turnover, POW's at Access Alliance are more likely to carry their contract to term due to the interdisciplinary nature of the professional training they receive and the links and networks they create during their tenure. Their employability is enhanced after the Peer Outreach program and many POWs are retained by Access Alliance at program end to perform new roles. While sustainability of the program is contingent on funding, the peer outreach model serves as a helpful example of how partnerships and resource sharing between agencies can reduce language related barriers faced by newcomers to Toronto.

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